



# Delivering the total package

## DA Hughes Forestry

DA Hughes Forestry Contracting has over twenty-five years of experience in the forestry sector. To ensure the company's continued success, its founder and owner Alan Hughes has, over recent years, taken steps to ensure that the company stays current in its service offering by evolving and diversifying to meet the changing needs of the industry and its customers.

Travelling to meet Alan, I should have taken a little bit more notice of the well-wisher who asked me, "Are you going to the yard or his house? Oh, the house! Good luck with that then!"

Halfway up (and I mean up) a one-car road, dreading meeting someone coming the other way, I eventually stopped at a 'white house' as instructed, with more than a little sigh of relief. The nice lady who came to the door in her dressing gown told me, "Oh no love, you have to go right up to the next white house." After a quick look up the hill, with no white house in sight, it's back in the car and first gear all the way. After the hairpin bend at the top, I arrived on Alan's drive not sure if I would be able to let go of the steering wheel.

He must be used to his visitors

arriving in this state. In fact, having now spent some time with him, I know he has a good sense of humour and was probably watching my progress and laughing at me, because there he was to meet me with a smile on his face, and the words, "You got here then?"

Having taken some deep breaths I have to agree that Alan is right when he says you would have to go some to beat the fantastic panoramic views he has from his house. He loves living there, despite the road, and says he will only leave it when he is taken out in his box. I get the offer of a bacon butty and a cup of coffee and meet Dave Watkin of Dave Watkin Transport Ltd. Dave, who has had his own lorries for over thirty years, has been Alan's haulier for a quite a few years. You can tell from their rapport they have become good mates. Sadly, Dave's HGV licence expired recently and due to health problems he has been unable to renew it. His son Martyn, who has worked with Dave for eighteen years, now drives their ERF six-wheeler and drag with a 252 Cummins engine. Dave told me, "It's a great vehicle for getting into the almost inaccessible kind of places where the timber usually is."

Alan is a 'from the roots up' forestry contractor. Starting out as a boy working in the woods for his father, then as a cutter for other contractors, it wasn't too long before he made the decision to go out on his own. He formed his own business – DA Hughes Forestry Contracting & Tree Surgery – around twenty years ago. In the early years he spent some time subcontracting for Tilhill, working with Gwyn Jones, Tilhill's harvesting manager. Alan told me, "Gwyn was a good manager. I found him very fair for work for."

Eventually Alan was in a position to be able to buy his first harvester, a JCB 812 with a Patu 400 head, purchased from Corwen Forestry for the princely sum of £17,000. He used this for a couple of years and then moved on to a 320 Caterpillar with a 762B head. He also bought his first 1210 forwarder from Timberjack UK, as it was called then. Alan said, "It was a bloody brilliant machine. I still have one."

Alan continued to work away building up his kit and his reputation. I asked him, "How do you go from being a cutter on the ground with chainsaws to owning the large amount of big kit you have now? That's no small achievement." He laughed and said, "When I was

working on the chainsaws, I didn't really take a wage from my business. I don't smoke, don't drink, and everything I earned I put back into the business. I know people around me look at the amount of kit I have and wonder, 'How has he done it?' They can't believe the amount of machines I have. But I got here through sheer hard work – no inheritance, no grants and nothing's been given to me. Nobody can take that away from me." He did add that he has had a couple of grants in the last couple of years, but they are the first.

After twenty years doing the job, DA Hughes Forestry Contracting has the experience and expertise to offer a wide range of forestry and environmental services, which include the purchasing and marketing of timber, harvesting operations, skylining, ground clearance, bog restoration on SSSI sites, chipping and firewood production and sales. Until recently, mulching was also an offering, but the FAE mulcher has recently been sold to W Marley Agricultural Contractors in County Durham.

Alan is still very active in both the contracting and chipping elements of the business, and is looking forward to taking delivery of a



The Valmet 890 that Alan has owned for approximately seven years, currently forwarding on a local spruce clearfell site.



Dave Watkin of Dave Watkin Transport pictured with his ERF six-wheeler and drag.



*Doosan 140 undergoing conversion at Forest Machine Services.*

new harvester he is having built, which should be delivered any day now. He told me that Forest Machine Services, of Hexham in Northumberland, are carrying out the conversion on the 2011, 14-tonne Doosan 140 tracked excavator. He said, "Kenny and Steve are brilliant. FMS are a great company; fair, straight, very reasonable on price and always willing to help."

The conversion will give the 14-tonne machine the performance of a 20-tonner, and will involve remapping the engine, enabling some of the restrictions put on by the vehicle manufacturer to be lifted. The engine is of the standard design fitted to all the machines, but the manufacturer rates it down. The pumps on the 140 will be taken out and replaced with the 225 equivalents. The remapping of the engine will give it more horsepower, boosting the hydraulic power. The rams are smaller, so with more oil flowing round the system, everything will be quicker than on a 225.

Alan is only aware of one other guy who has had a similar conversion done. He has never seen that machine working, and admits he is taking a bit of a risk, but the owner has told Alan that his machine is now super-fast and working well.

I asked Alan why he was going to the expense of having the conversion done. "I did have a Doosan 225 which is ten foot wide. It was a great machine, but I couldn't get it into many of the jobs because of its width. The conversion will mean I have a powerful but narrower machine."

Ever watchful of the way things are changing, a few years ago Alan identified an opportunity to get

involved in the biomass market. As a result, in 2010 he invested in specialist machinery for the production of woodchip and formed the company Woodchip Biomass Ltd, processing chip on their site and also offering a mobile contract chipping service specifically tailored for clients wishing to process their own wood. With grant aid from WEBS 2, Alan and his daughter Sasha have now developed a former railway site into a purpose-built storage facility for their quality woodfuels, servicing mainly Mid and North Wales, the West Midlands and the Welsh Borders. The site also incorporates a weighbridge which is open to the public. Having gained a reputation for quality, Woodchip Biomass Ltd is now very close to gaining Woodsure accreditation.

Two years ago Sasha returned from New Zealand and she is now operations and marketing manager for all the company's new ventures. She describes this role as basically doing anything that is required on the new projects. Initially that has involved dealing with planning, organising the grant and overseeing site development, but as all that is settling down she will be able to concentrate more on marketing the business. Having gained a Business Studies degree at Bangor University, and worked in various sales roles, as a researcher for local authorities, and also in the event and exhibition industry, Sasha brings a good range of skills to the business.

Originally when Sasha came back to the UK she was just lending a hand, but found that she developed a dedication and passion for the business, which led to her appointment.

She told me, "There have been a lot of challenges, especially in developing the yard. It's been a

good learning curve, sorting out water supplies and power connections. As a result I have learnt a lot. It will be so much easier if I ever have to do it again!"

Later that day Sasha will be sizing up all the cabling for the yard. She has to estimate the site's power requirements and anticipate what will be needed for any further development. She admits that things like this take ages to sort out.

I asked Sasha what it was like working with dad, as they are very different people. She said, "We do have some disagreements. I like things to get done super quickly, and am perhaps more methodical. I am definitely a perfectionist. Dad tells me when I am imposing impossible demands. He has great skills, knowledge and contacts, so together we work well."

The new biomass business offers a complete range of quality biomass woodfuels, which include virgin quality chip, EnPlus A-grade pellets, firewood logs and briquettes, which they supply to both domestic and commercial users. Only virgin timber is processed to ensure there are no contaminants, and only machinery specifically designed for processing woodfuel is used to ensure the correct specification of chip for clients, giving increased boiler efficiency and minimising bridging and blockage problems. Timber is sourced from sustainable resources, mainly via Alan's own forestry operation. At present they are using a

Mus-Max WT 10 Z, producing premium grade G30, G50 and G100 woodchips. The WT 10 Z is capable of processing rounds of up to 70cm, and, with perfect conditions can produce up to 250 tons a day.

The Mus-Max is currently on the market and soon to be replaced by a Pezzolato chipper. Alan has always been a fan of Pezzolato machines and has recently become a UK dealer for the company, something he has wanted to achieve for quite some time. Pezzolato have recently sold their first machine into the UK, and by the summer they will have two machines in the country.

Around fourteen years ago Alan was looking to buy a smaller chipper and went to the Pezzolato factory in Italy. He was very impressed with their operation and the build quality of the machines. The Pezzolato 190 that he bought then is still going strong today.

Forestry contracting is where Alan's heart is, and will always continue to be the backbone of the business, but Alan has reached a point where he would like to take a step back. He would like to move over to work on his new project, which is already under way. Under a new arm, DA Hughes Forestry Equipment, he is building a retail store that will sell equipment, oils and forestry/agricultural sundries such as fencing supplies to the local population; the site is well placed on a busy road and should do very well. They have been selling oils locally since 2010,



*Alan Hughes and Dave Watkin pictured with Alan's first 190 Pezzolato chipper.*



*Alan Hughes and Sevy Steeman, with the Ponsse Ergo with H73 head, owned since last year and currently engaged on a local, high-volume contract.*

and are now approved distributors for Exol and Morris Lubricants on a national scale, having negotiated special rates specific for the forestry sector.

A new product that they are already selling is Toptex, a permeable protection fabric for the protection of roundwood and woodchip. In order to get the optimum energy yield from stored biomass products, moisture content must be kept to a minimum. When undercover storage is not possible, using Toptex helps the timber breathe while keeping the moisture out and dust particles in. Toptex is available in three-, four- and five-metre widths and on fifty-metre rolls.

Alan and Sasha have many ideas which they would like to progress for the store. For Alan to fully concentrate on making these changes he needs good people in place who could handle the daily running of the contracting business. Alan, like a lot of other contractors, is finding it hard to source good quality staff. He told me, "It isn't easy finding good workers who have a feel for the work and the machines, and tick all the other boxes, such as mechanical knowledge, reliability and working at the right pace. It's also difficult to find someone who will look after the machine like it was their own. They must be out there but they seem to be really hard to find."

In the past Alan has been able to rely on friends Meirion and Hywel Hughes, a reliable and hard working father and son team, though Hywel is currently in ill health. It is hoped he will make a full recovery soon.

Sasha coming into the family

business has lightened Alan's load, but they both admit that she could not, and probably wouldn't want to, run the forestry side. It needs someone who knows the forestry business from all sides and is a natural with the machines.

Alan's list of forestry machines is impressive. He currently has a Valmet 890, Timberjack 1210 forwarder, Ponsse Buffalo, Ponsse Ergo HS16, Ponsse Ergo with Ponsse 73 head plus the 14-tonne Dooson 140 conversion soon to arrive, as well as an 18-tonne Doosan with a 12-foot wide track span for use on boggy ground as a skyline.

As if all the forestry and biomass wasn't enough, Alan, together with Meirion Hughes, also carries out tree surgery work. This they do mainly at the weekends and when they have the time.

The company is continuing to grow at a good pace, so what does the future hold for DA Hughes as a whole? Alan has a number of contracts in place, including a 10,000-tonne clearfell job together with two skyline sites in operation. He sees the forestry contracting continuing to grow and becoming an integral part of his operations, but hopes to be doing less of the physical work himself.

To keep up with this growth over the next few months, Alan will be making a concerted effort to build up his staff. This would afford him the time and resources to be more involved in the growth of the other areas of his businesses. His problem is that, although he can work any of the machines and do any of the jobs within the businesses, he can't be everywhere at once. Sasha has



*Timberjack 1210, operated by Gareth Manuel, working the steep slopes of a harvesting site in Llanfechain, extracting a mixed crop of 4,000 tonnes of Douglas and Grand fir.*

reduced the workload to a certain degree, but until he can find more staff that are reliable, and have a feel for the contracting side, he will not be in a position to take as much of a step back as he would like.

Having spent time with Alan, I think he is one of those people who need to have the challenge of lots of balls in the air, but he needs help with that juggling act. He told me he was a Libran with moon in Gemini – effectively two personalities – but he is learning that he can't do the work of two people. He is ready to delegate and hopefully he will find the calibre of staff that he needs. With their new ventures come even more new challenges, which they are more than able to surmount. They are in a good area, have a good history and reputation and a sound forward plan to take them confidently into the future.

As we were going to press, Alan received the news that they had gained Woodsure accreditation.

Whichever way you look at it, the future looks rosy for DA Hughes and Woodchip Biomass Ltd.

Here is my revenge for the road... Throughout our interview Alan kept going off on tangents, which was both funny and frustrating for Sasha and me. I had asked Alan a few times, "What do you see for the future?" and off he went again. I was determined to get my answer, so I asked him firmly once more, "Alan, what do you see yourself doing in five years?" His answer... "Well, I have always fancied being a porn star."

Sorry Alan, I think you have left that a wee bit late. Stick with the forestry.

But as you can see from the rest of this article, I did eventually get a sensible answer!

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*Sasha and Alan. Since her return Sasha has developed a real dedication and passion for the business.*